

Opening Statement of Chairman Tom Davis
House Government Reform Committee Hearing: “Keeping Metro on Track”
July 28, 2005

Good morning and thank you for coming. The purpose of today’s hearing is to highlight the vital role the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority plays in supporting the federal government, and to begin discussing the need for a reinvigorated federal commitment to the Metro system -- one that helps ensure Metro has what it needs to accommodate current and future ridership growth.

The federal government’s dependence on the Metro system is undeniable. Hundreds of thousands of federal employees and contractors rely on the bus and rail service WMATA provides to get to and from work every day. In fact, half of Metro’s peak period riders are federal employees and contractors; more than 50 federal agencies are located adjacent to Metro stations. As we know all too well, when Metro shuts down, the federal government shuts down.

In addition to federal employees, every day thousands of visitors from around the world travel to Washington, D.C., and rely on the Metro system to transport them to the many sights and landmarks of our Nation’s capital.

Unlike other public transportation systems in the country, the Washington Metro system is a national asset. Congress has recognized this fact three times in recent decades by authorizing and appropriating funds for construction and capital improvements to the Metro system. As Congress has recognized in the past, Metro is an entity in which all American taxpayers have an interest.

It’s time again to recognize that shared national interest, if we are to protect past investments and prevent the system from collapsing. It’s time again for Congress to recognize Metro’s importance to federal operations and commit to a long-term partnership with WMATA and its member jurisdictions.

To help begin the dialogue on the need for a renewed federal investment in Metro, today I have introduced legislation that reaffirms our symbiotic relationship. This legislation amends the National Capital Transportation Act of 1969 – which marked the federal government’s first long-term investment in the Metro system – to authorize \$150 million annually over ten years for capital improvements and critical maintenance needs.

Recognizing that the federal government is not the only interested or duty-bound stakeholder in WMATA’s long-term health, the legislation stipulates that the federal investment would be matched by state and local contributions. Specifically, the legislation would require the jurisdictions making up the “WMATA Compact” – Virginia, Maryland, and the District of Columbia – to come up with a true dedicated funding stream to pay for their share of Metro’s costs – before the federal funding is authorized.

This is good policy and, frankly, good politics. We cannot get consensus behind a \$1.5 billion federal commitment unless we’re absolutely certain that WMATA is not going to continue

reeling from year to year, tin cup in hand, jurisdiction to jurisdiction. The current requirement of quote-unquote “stable and reliable” is, in reality, anything but. Subjecting the local match to annual appropriations processes rather than having a dedicated stream set in stone is not the wisest way to run a railroad.

In addition to requiring a commitment from state and local governments before the federal contribution to Metro kicks in, the legislation also recognizes that the well-publicized management challenges WMATA has faced in recent years have prompted calls for enhanced oversight and accountability. Acknowledging the need to balance new money with strengthened oversight, the legislation would establish an Inspector General to oversee the affairs of the transit system, and would require federal representation on the WMATA board, to be named by the General Services Administration.

These oversight and accountability mechanisms are critical if we are to credibly move forward with the much-needed authorization of funds.

Finally, the bill includes language dealing with the proposed sale or lease of Metro properties in Vienna, Takoma Park, and Largo. These provisions reflect concerns that I, Mr. Van Hollen, and Mr. Wynn have about the wisdom of these proposed sales, especially at a time when we all agree better accountability and oversight are needed.

I, for one, have yet to see a compelling fiscal case for the sale of a parcel in Vienna, and I have to ask if Metro is getting the best bang for its riders’ buck. It’s hard for me to make the case for a renewed federal investment in Metro when they dispose so easily of valuable existing assets.

In the Vienna case, WMATA’s own project manager has acknowledged that the development would result in significant lost parking that would seriously strain the Vienna station. I have a responsibility to ask if Metro’s capabilities and limitations are being properly considered in regional land use planning, and whether Metro has been complicit in illogical land use decisions.

In closing, this is the first inning of a nine-inning ballgame. Persuading the federal government to take on a new, long-term relationship with the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority will itself be a long-term investment. But I am committed to invest the time and energy it takes to make it happen, as are the other cosponsors of this legislation. As we work to build support in Congress, I am optimistic the regional jurisdictions will do what needs to be done on their end to establish a dedicated funding stream for a transit system we all rely so heavily on.

I welcome all of the witnesses to today’s hearing and I look forward to their testimony.